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Presentation 1, *The House of Mirth*

In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, Lily faces many obstacles to finding happiness and purpose because of the highly restrictive society the novel is set in. The novel is set in the late 1800s when women were restricted by job opportunities, education opportunities, what kind of activities they could participate in, who they could be seen talking to, what they could wear, as well as many other things. Despite these restrictions, the novel’s main character Lily Bart had a “craving for a fair chance” in this society and ended up struggling for one her entire life (301). Lily was temporarily accepted into the high class society she desired because of her beauty and charm, but she was treated merely like “an expensive toy in the hands of a spoiled child (241).” Lily spent her entire life trying to find a “habitable region” in this society, but was not able to become successful in this society because of her poor upbringing, lack of support, and financial troubles (262).

Lily’s parents did not give her any ideas of success other than using her beauty to marry into wealth. She was “brought up to be ornamental” and “all her interests and activities had been taught to centre around it (297,317).” When the only plan her parents gave her for success fails, she becomes trapped in debt to Gus Trenor due to the fact that she never learned the value of the dollar and is an irresponsible spender. As the novel goes on, Lily only falls further from her parents’ wish that she marries a wealthy man, and is forced to find a job to support herself. Since her parents did not teach her any practical work skills, she is “forgetful, awkward, and slow to learn” when it comes to her first job working with professionals in the millinery industry (297). She is trapped in this society where she cannot receive monetary support without owing something in return that will ruin her reputation and she is not a good worker so it is difficult to support herself.

It was almost impossible and very rare for a woman to be supporting herself in this society because of the domestic role assigned to women during the time. Women did not normally bring in money for the household during this time, their sole role being to take care of the house and raise children. This meant that women needed monetary help, at the least, until they got married and could be supported by their husbands. In Lily’s case, she is taken in by her aunt Mrs. Peniston after her mother dies. Mrs. Peniston does not do this because she loves or cares about Lily, she did so because “she took a certain pleasure in her act” of looking good when no one else wanted to take Lily in “with the eyes of her little world upon her (36).” Lily has the insincere support of her aunt and friends until false rumors of her affair with George Dorset are spread, ruining her reputation. Once her reputation is ruined, her entire family “unanimously washed their hands of” her (236). At this point, Lily must find a job a woman can perform, which are hard to find and not well paid during this time. The fact that Lily got a job as a woman in this society serves as a testament of how she tried to work against her formidable circumstances.

A major obstacle Lily faces is due to the fact that wealth is the source of influence in this society and Lily does not happen to have any. Bertha Dorset, a very rich and influential woman in society, makes up rumors about Lily out of jealousy and spite. Lily’s suffers from this because “Judy Trenor and her own family have deserted her too- and all because Bertha Dorset has said such horrible things (269, 270)” Lily’s friend, Mattie Gormer, is a perfect example of a friend of Lily’s who deserts her because of Bertha’s influence. Once Bertha comes into her life, Mattie begins “sacrificing all her old friends” and the “drift of fashionable life would facilitate Mattie’s detachment” from Lily (251, 261). Most of her friends follow this same route because it is easier to believe the more influential wealthy people of society. Rumors are “bound to happen to a good looking girl with stingy relatives (259).” The wealthy have much more to offer to the people who believe them than Lily does.

Lily is an innocent girl with good intentions. She has a hard time finding happiness in this novel because her parents taught her that she would find happiness in wealth and the other role models in her life are not sources of positive inspiration either. The support she is looking for cannot be found in her family or the wealthy members of society, but only in people who genuinely care for her and whom she gives support to in return. She is never taught values other than to strive for wealth, so “there had never been a time when she had any real relation to life (317).” Instead, these higher class people use her, start rumors about her, and desert her. Lily shows her good intentions at the end of the novel by using the money she inherits to pay back her debts. It is a tragedy that she is not happy until soon before she dies and she is unappreciated until then, because she was simply a victim of the circumstance of society.